

Savoring a California Wine Country Far From Napa and the Crowds

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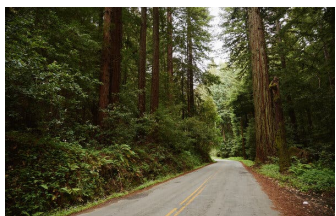
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It is a trek to Windy Oaks Estate Vineyard & Winery in the foothills of the Santa Cruz mountains, a journey that includes passing through a forest damp with coastal fog. Storms battered Northern California this winter and, at one point along the route, a chunk of asphalt had tumbled into a soggy creek. A carpet of moss covered a stone bridge built in 1939, its markings now barely legible. It was as if nature was taking the road back. Oak trees and wood fences — even an old parked motorcycle — were consumed by lichen.

But beyond the mottled redwoods and moss-covered oaks, rows of grapevines appeared on a sunny hillside in Corralitos, where [Windy Oaks](#) was built on a former apple orchard with sweeping views of Monterey Bay. Windy Oaks is one of a growing patchwork of wineries an hour's drive south from Silicon Valley that are making and serving prizewinning chardonnay, pinot noir and other estate vintages. If winemakers in Sonoma and Napa Valleys, farther north, are viewed as sophisticated siblings, the wineries in the triangle formed by the towns of Corralitos, Morgan Hill and Hollister are their relaxed country cousins. They are related, but each has its own quirks.

Image



There is a bucolic charm in these less-traveled byways. Credit...Drew Kelly for The New York Times

There is a bucolic charm in these less-traveled byways. Local beekeepers sell honey out of the backs of their pickup trucks. Bags of Meyer lemons, \$5 apiece, are stacked in self-service roadside cubbies. Goats graze just about everywhere. And if you take a wrong turn, you might find yourself at [Gizdich Ranch](#) in Watsonville, where you can pick your own berries and eat a slice of apricot pie.

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Mostly, though, newcomers to the area are delighted that the busloads of noisy tourists that clog Napa Valley's Silverado Trail in summer don't exist here. That means you can enjoy a quiet picnic in the middle of a vineyard. Who knows? Maybe the server pouring wine that day might be the winemaker herself.

At Windy Oaks I was greeted by Cookies, a portly feline who followed me to a table at the edge of a row of vines. Two couples had arrived before me and laid out a feast of cheese and sausages from Corralitos Market & Sausage Co. One of the picnickers offered me a Polish sausage, rich and peppery, that paired nicely with the 2020 Henry's Block estate pinot noir I was tasting.

Image



Along with his wife, Windy Oaks' founding winemaker, Jim Schultze, released their first 36 cases of pinot noir in 2001. Credit...Drew Kelly for The New York Times

In 2001, Windy Oaks' founding winemaker, Jim Schultze, and his wife, Judy, released their first 36 cases of pinot noir. The Henry's Block I tasted was from the original three-acre vineyard planted in 1996 and named after Judy's father. The Schultzes now tend 27 acres and make 5,000 cases of wine a year, buying grapes from nearby Monterey County to supplement what they don't grow.

My server, Elaine, was unhurried, explaining that the grapes were processed with minimal intervention as it's done in Burgundy. As a bonus, she offered me a taste not on the menu: the Judy's Block estate pinot noir from 2018. Grown on half an acre and aged in a single barrel, only 24 cases of the wine were produced. (It costs \$110 per bottle.) I bought a sparkling pinot noir and, after giving Cookies one last belly rub, strolled to the top of the hill where I watched sailboats drift out to sea.

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About 20 miles east of Corralitos, along the southernmost edge of the Santa Clara Valley, a group of wineries is wedged between Gilroy and Morgan Hill — everything from mom-and-pop enterprises to award-winning pros. In the mid-1800s, the valley was a prominent producer of wine grapes. But decades later, many vineyards here were devastated by phylloxera, an aphid-like insect that devours the roots and leaves of grapevines. Farmers switched to growing plum and apricot trees in the 1900s, as well as garlic and tomatoes, before urban sprawl and, later, Silicon Valley, pushed out most of the farms. Still, pockets of winemaking remain.

Image



The outdoor tasting patio at Sarah's Vineyard, in Gilroy, Calif., is particularly family-friendly. Credit...Drew Kelly for The New York Times

In 2021, a new winemaking co-op was opened in Gilroy to serve a burgeoning class of local vintners. It was founded by Tim Slater, the owner of [Sarah's Vineyard](#), which is situated at the base of Mount Madonna, a popular hiking spot with 200-foot-tall redwoods and miles of forested trails. Sarah's was built in a low valley where spring's green fields turn crisp and golden by July. Breezes that drift off the Pacific Ocean cool the warm inland air, allowing the grapes to thrive.

Sarah's was busy when I arrived on a Sunday, with most of the 15 or so tables filled with groups or families. A father and son played bocce on a nearby court, while two young girls sat quietly with their parents at a table eating carrot sticks and coloring in books. I ordered a \$30 reserve flight, which included four red wines: two pinot noirs, a cabernet sauvignon and Sarah's Nuit d'Enfer, a blend of cabernet franc and merlot.

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Service was halting, though, so I asked my server to bring all four wines at the same time. And some of the staff seemed unprepared to answer even basic questions, relying on rudimentary winemaking notes. Still, the flight was fairly priced, and the valley views charming.

Image



The vineyards at Sarah's Vineyard in Gilroy, Calif. Credit...Drew Kelly for The New York Times

Image



Calera Wine Co., was built in the foothills of the Gabilan Mountains. Credit... Drew Kelly for The New York Times

By contrast, Geoff and Chantelle Mace, the owners of Calerrain Wines, greeted guests themselves on a recent Saturday at their tasting room in the middle of a tiny vineyard on the outskirts of Gilroy. Mr. Mace offered pours of a 2021 pinot noir from grapes grown in the Paicines area, about 35 miles away. Like many local winemakers, Mr. Mace procures grapes from growers in different regions and makes the wine himself.

Perhaps it was the flowers that Mr. Mace said they recently planted, or maybe because the tasting room is behind the house where he and his wife live, but the experience reminded me of the rustic family-owned vineyards I have visited in southern Italy.

About 10 miles away, the tasting room at Lightpost Winery in Morgan Hill can be found in a ho-hum office park. But what it lacks in pastoral ambience, it made up for in intellectual heft. There I met Sofia Fedotova, an electronics recycling entrepreneur who made money in tech before becoming a vintner. In 2018, she opened Lightpost and teamed with Christian Roguenant, who grew up in Burgundy and is Lightpost's head winemaker.

Lightpost planted a vineyard in Morgan Hill seven years ago but, for now, mostly gets its wine grapes from growers in the Santa Cruz, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Russian River and Paso Robles regions. Ms. Fedotova poured me a taste of her favorite cabernet sauvignon. We talked about what to serve it with (she said steak, I suggested rack of lamb) and, for another 20 minutes, we discussed the area's weather patterns, soil chemistry and the challenge of farming in today's climate.

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Of course, you would expect a winemaker to know more about the terrain than the average guest. But the staff was equally knowledgeable. Vivian, the tasting room manager, gave us an impromptu lesson, too, with a side-by-side comparison of how grapes vary by vintage. A larger, more corporate tasting room would be hard-pressed to take the time. Already the young winery is attracting attention; its 2018 reserve cabernet sauvignon from Paso Robles has won state competitions. A friend and I stayed for nearly two hours and, between us, left with three bottles of their La Grande Sofi sparkling rose from 2018 (\$44 each).

Image



A barrel storage room at Calera Wine Co., in Hollister, Calif. The vineyard, started in the 1970s, was a pioneer in American pinot noir. Credit... Drew Kelly for The New York Times

Bay Area wine lovers who venture this far south are often on their way to [Calera Wine Co.](#) in Hollister, a pioneer in American pinot noir. In 1974, [Josh Jensen](#) purchased a limestone-rich parcel of land near Mount Harlan in San Benito County. He had been told by his winemaking mentors in France that pinot noir and chardonnay grapes needed limestone-rich soil to make truly great wines. In 1975, he started with 24 acres of pinot noir on three separate parcels, naming each one to show that they would produce their own distinct wines.

The winery was built halfway between Mount Harlan and Hollister, in the foothills of the Gabilan Mountains. To get there, I drove through straw-colored flatlands east of Highway 101, where cows grazed, and patches of yellow mustard and Queen Anne's lace brightened the drab landscape. The mood changed as I wound through the foothills to Calera. A ribbon of oak trees snaked its way down a sunken valley. Hawks soared high in the sky. In "East of Eden," John Steinbeck described the Gabilan Mountains as "full of sun and loveliness and a kind of invitation." The winery beckoned.

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Bay Area wine lovers who venture this far south are often on their way to Calera Wine Co. in Hollister, Calif. Credit... Drew Kelly for The New York Times

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Calera had a more polished, corporate feel than the other wineries I visited. That is no surprise, I guess, because Mr. Jensen in 2017 sold Calera to Duckhorn Portfolio, which owns several other prominent California wineries. (He died last year.) I grabbed a seat on the veranda overlooking a lake, next to a couple who said they came every Sunday for a glass of wine. The breeze smelled like fresh hay and wildflowers; blue jays fluttered in the canopy of wisteria. It was blissfully quiet. No cars. No mindless chatter or bleating cellphones. Just the soulful caw of a crow in the distance.

A server delivered five glasses stacked on a metal tree to my table with a sheet of tasting notes that explained each wine. I enjoyed the chenin blanc, but it was the pinot noir (as you might expect) that really stood out. As I finished my last sip, about three dozen sparrows swooped into a nearby bush, bobbing and flapping their wings as they competed for space on the pencil-thin branches. I guess I found a traffic jam after all.
